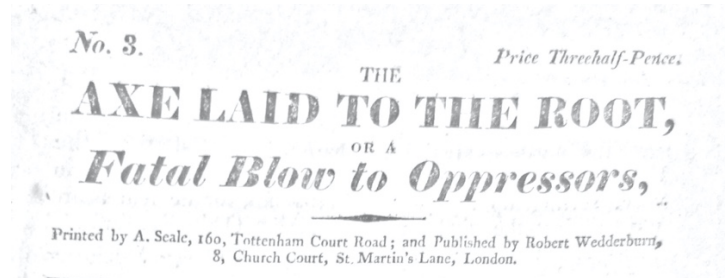


Slavery, Male Violence Against Women and Revolution in Robert Wedderburn's *The Axe Laid to the Root* (1817)

‘Revolutions in Print: Rebellion, Reform and the Press’, PPCRG Special Issue Zine



The Axe Laid to the Root

Robert Wedderburn's six issues of *The Axe Laid to the Root, or a Fatal Blow to Oppressors* was published by the author in London in 1817. In these rare pamphlets, he writes against slavery, male violence toward women, and advocates for governments to contain equal numbers of men and women. Many writers have written against slavery; even more sponsor revolutionary politics. However, there are two areas Robert (I use the first name to distinguish from his slaver-rapist father) writes on that are ground-breaking: male rage against women; and publishing in Jamaican Creole. An early champion of this in print, Robert Wedderburn predates more popular examples by a century in his incendiary *Axe Laid to the Root*.

Robert Wedderburn



Robert Wedderburn, 1762- 1836/6?) CC BY-NC

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1762, Robert was the son of Scottish plantation owner James Wedderburn, and Rosanna who was enslaved. Rosanna, who had been born in Africa, was raped by James who sold her when five months pregnant with Robert. The new 'owners' set Robert free but kept Rosanna enslaved. From his father, 'an extensive proprietor, of sugar estates in Jamaica', Robert 'received no benefit in the world' (Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery* [1824], 45). Robert was subsequently brought up by Rosanna, and his grandmother, Talkee Amy. After joining the navy at sixteen, Robert arrived in Britain aged seventeen where, poverty stricken, he became a tailor and then part of revolutionary Spencean circles. Followers of Spence believed that 'lordship in the soil' should be abolished and all ownership of land should be in public hands (*Axe*, 3, 45).

Equal Representation for Women

The first edition of *The Axe Laid to the Root* calls for an end to slavery. By the second edition Robert considers what sort of government there should be once those formerly enslaved gain control of their lands. Robert suggests that these new governments have a delegate for every 2000 people and are changed yearly. There should also be 'no white delegate in your assembly' (*Axe*, 2, 25). These governments should be more humane than previous ones: 'Put no man to death for any crime [...] nor cut off the nose nor ears, as is the practice in Jamaica' (*Axe*, 2, 25). He demands equality for women, writing, 'let every individual learn the art of war, yea, even the females, for they are capable of displaying courage' (*Axe*, 2, 26). Robert insists, 'have no lawyers amongst you, every dispute may be decided in your own villages, by 12 men and 12 women; let them be above fifty; do not despise the judgement of old women, for they are generally clear in their perceptions' (*Axe*, 2, 30). This call for equal representation for women in every sphere is ahead of much of the world in the twenty-first century, as is his insistence on eradicating ageism against older women.

Poetry

The Axe also features poems, such as 'The Desponding Negro' who states 'I was dragg'd from my hut and chain'd as a slave, / In a dark floating dungeon upon the salt wave' (*Axe*, 2, 26-27). There is 'The Negro Boy sold for a Watch', told by a repentant slave owner: 'And yet for this same simple toy, / I sold the weeping negro boy' (*Axe*, 2, 27). Robert Wedderburn adopts differing personas in his poems. 'The Africans Complaint on board a Slave Ship' is voiced by an enslaved man, and innovatively it exemplifies one of the earliest uses of Jamaican Creole in print. In this poem the slave-ship becomes a flying winged house:

On dis wiuged house I stand
Dat with poor black man is flying,
far away from his own land
(*Axe*, 2, 32)

The man 'in chains', who 'de white man beat', is consumed by slavery, 'Sure de black be eat by white man'. He dreams he was in 'Negro land': 'Dere we've room and air and freedom, / Dere our little dwellings stand'. The man dreams of his home in Africa:

Dere I often go when sleeping,
See my kindred round me stand,
Hear 'em toke--den wak in weeping,
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Back there he could hold his lover in the night, 'Dere my black love arms were round a/ De whole night, not like dis band'. The man is now fettered by iron around his neck after 'traders stole and

sold me, / Den was put in iron band'. But he is assured of freedom and return home: 'When I'm dead they cannot hold me/ Soon I'll be in black man land'. Death is all he has to hope for.

Jamaican Creole

Writing in Jamaican Creole is often dated back to texts such as Mary Pamela Milne-Home's *Mamma's Black Nurse Stories* (1890), Thomas MacDermot's *All Jamaica Library* (from 1903), Claude McKay's *Songs of Jamaica* (1912), or Louise Bennett's *Dialect Verses* (1942). Nonetheless, Robert Wedderburn features prose Jamaican Creole in *The Axe to the Root* in 1817. Writing in the vernacular is still an issue in the twenty-first century. *The Gleaner* newspaper, in 2011, has Keisha Hill writing on how Edward Seaga, prime minister of Jamaica from 1980-1989 and chancellor of the University of Technology from 2010 until his death in 2019, ['says it would be a waste of the country's educational resources to teach Patois in schools.'](#) Creole is often seen as a lower status language.

Flash non-fiction

No. 3 of *The Axe* begins with a fifty-seven-word flash non-fiction narrative concerning the abduction of a woman and child by white Christian slavers. Under the headline 'Slave Stealing and Murder Tolerated by a British Jury', this compressed story is voiced by a distressed man.

Top Tife, top tife, top tife! dat England man, dat white man, de Christian buckera tiffey my pickenninney, he hungry, he go yam 'im! Oh! der go noder, he tiffey my mamma, he be Catolic Christian, he rosse my mamma in de fire for yam, what me do for my mamma? Oh! me belly ache, me die! (*Axe*, 3, 35)

This harrowing narrative tells of the destruction of a small family by two representatives of slavery in Jamaica, a Spaniard, and an Englishman. The enslaved man tries to stop an English Christian 'buckera', (white man or master, from the Nigerian word 'mbakara' meaning European) from

stealing and possibly eating his child. 'Then, 'der go noder', a Catholic Spaniard who roasts the man's wife in a fire, again the man thinks for 'yam' (food). The man tries to help but is shot and dies. In this edition, Robert gives examples of the routine torture and killing of enslaved people. There is a captain who was acquitted after 'hanging a girl by each limb for twenty minutes, then throwing her down the ladder of the after hatchway, and in the morning she was found dead, on the spot where she fell'. (*Axe*, 3, 36). Robert, like Olaudah Equiano, tells of horrors inflicted by slavery, but innovatively he often does this in Jamaican Creole.

Church and King

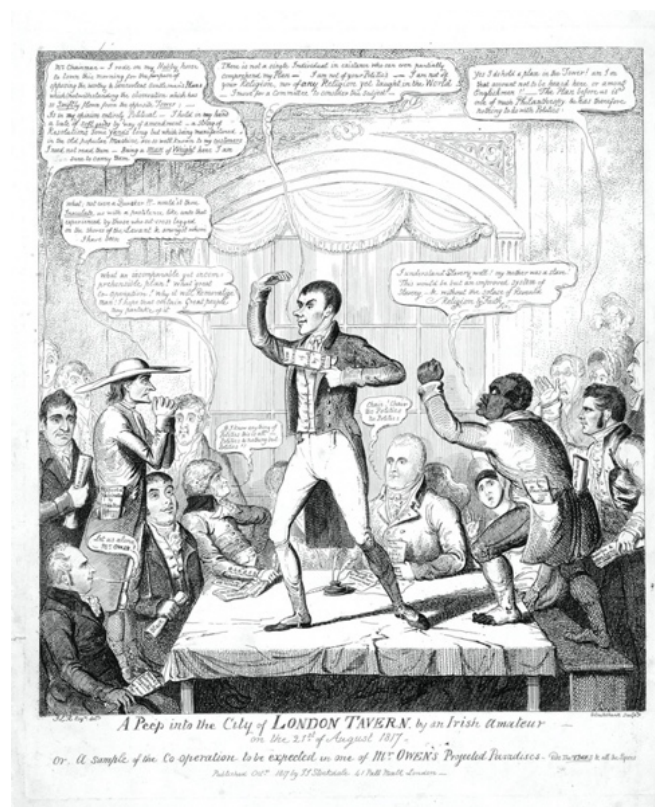
Robert Wedderburn got no help from anyone in power. In *The Axe* he exhorts people to 'Beware of the clergy of every description' as they always 'preach agreeable to the will of the governor under whom they live'. He writes that people should 'never suffer them to interfere in your worldly affairs: for they are cunning, and are therefore more capable of vice than you are' (*Axe*, 1, 7). And yet, he addresses both George, Prince of Wales, and the Archbishop of Canterbury exhorting them to use their influence. To the Regent he says that 'many are held as government slaves in your name in the colonies. Free them, Napoleon set the pattern' (*Axe*, 5, 51). In post-Waterloo Britain Wedderburn skewers the victors' morals.

Male Violence Against Women

Highlighting male emotional, sexual, and deadly physical violence against women, Robert writes: 'My father ranged through the whole of his household for his own lewd purposes; for they being his personal property, cost nothing extra; and if any one proved with child--why, it was an acquisition which might one day fetch something in the market, like a horse or pig in Smithfield' (*The Horrors of Slavery*, 46). Rosanna 'was FORCED to submit to him, being *his Slave*, THOUGH HE KNEW SHE DISLIKED HIM!' Young Robert witnessed terrible things happen to Rosanna: 'I have seen my poor mother stretched on the ground, tied hands and feet, and FLOGGED in the

most indecent manner, though PREGNANT AT THE SAME TIME!!!' (*Horrors*, 51). Robert also watched the savage beating of his grandmother Talkee Amy: 'My heart glows with revenge, and cannot forgive. Repent ye christians, for flogging my aged grandmother before my face, when she was accused of witchcraft by a silly European' (*Axe*, 1, 12-13). Robert Wedderburn relates how a slaver named Payne beat Talkee Amy almost to death: 'he tied up the poor old woman of seventy years and flogged her to that degree, that she would have died, but for the interference of a neighbour. Now, what aggravated the affair was, that my grandmother had brought up this young villain from eight years of age' (*Horrors*, 49). The perverted sick relationships caused by slavery inform Robert's political sensibilities.

Revolutionary Violence



George Cruikshank, 'A peep into the city of London Tavern. By an Irish amateur —on the 21st of August 1817', showing Robert Wedderburn to the Right of Robert Owen who is speaking. © The Trustees of the British Museum; (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Robert was proud to have inherited his temperament from his mother, 'I glory in her *rebellious* disposition, and which I have inherited from her.' (*Horrors*, 59) The sixth edition of *The Axe* ends mid-sentence with 'Now, gentle- *To Be Continued*.' But it was the end. There was no seventh edition. Nonetheless, Robert Wedderburn continued to preach from his small chapel in Soho, where he was spied on. One spy report cites him as saying 'they tell us to be quiet like that *bloody spooney Jesus Christ* who like a *Bloody Fool* tells when we get a slap on one side of the Face turn gently round and ask them to smack the other [...] give me a Rusty Sword for as they have declared War against the people' (The National Archives, TS 11/45/167). Understandably Robert was feared by the government. Arrested for blasphemous libel in December 1819, he was jailed without bail and sentenced to two years imprisonment in Dorchester. This probably saved Robert's life, as friends involved in the Cato Street Conspiracy were captured in February 1820. Five of them, including fellow black Jamaican Scot William Davidson, were hanged at Newgate in May 1820. It was not over for Robert though as he published *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings* in 1824. Robert Wedderburn died in 1835 or 36--the exact date is unknown. In recent years he has inspired a biography by Martin Hoyle and his life and work has informed the [Robert Wedderburn Dance Theatre Project](#). The struggles Robert Wedderburn held against slavery, and violence towards women persist. So do his demands for equal representation for women.

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John Gardner

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Fig. 1

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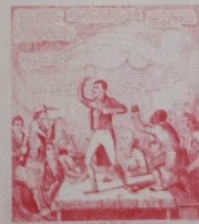


Fig. 2

Five of them, including fellow black Jamaican Scot William Davidson, were hanged at Newgate in May 1820. It was not over for Robert though as he published *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings* in 1824. Robert Wedderburn died in 1835 or 36--the exact date is unknown. In recent years he has inspired a biography by Martin Hoyle and his life and work has informed

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